Profiles in caution: 'Hard Choices' by Hillary Clinton

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By Glenn Altschuler

By now it is clear that “Hard Choices” (Simon & Schuster, $35), Hillary Rodham Clinton’s memoir of her tenure as secretary of state, did not change the narrative. To be sure, Mrs. Clinton acknowledges, more forcefully than in the past, that her 2002 vote in the U.S. Senate authorizing President Bush to use military force against Iraq was a mistake, “plain and simple” and reveals that she pushed for the vetting, training and arming of opponents of Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad; and takes credit for brokering the cease-fire that ended hostilities in Gaza in 2011.

That said, a consensus has emerged that “Hard Choices” is competent, comprehensive, lifeless, leaden, and long.

Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the message-testing “Hard Choices” provides about the presidential campaign Mrs. Clinton is likely to wage in 2016.
She knows that Barack Obama’s victory in 2012 depended on obtaining about 55 percent of the votes of women. And her memoir is filled with appeals designed to retain — or increase — that total.

Mrs. Clinton’s embrace of the concept of “smart power,” an approach to foreign policy that makes appropriate use of the “hard power” of the military and the “soft power” of diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian influences, for example, may be motivated by gender politics as well as principle.

Especially when Mrs. Clinton also manages to present herself as a hawkish dove. Educational exchanges, cultural tours and scientific collaboration don’t get headlines, she indicates, but they have influenced generations of leaders.

Mrs. Clinton also reminds readers, however, that she supported military operations in Libya, the troop surge in Afghanistan, and has “not sought a correction” to reports in the media that she used a four-letter word to dismiss a proposal that the raid on Osama bin-Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan not take place during the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, at which President Obama makes jokes to reporters and celebrities.

In tone as well as content, “Hard Choices” is aimed directly at women. Because women’s rights “are not separable from or a subsidiary of human rights,” Mrs. Clinton states her intention to “push the envelope” as far as she can to combat discrimination and violence. She notes the double standard “applied to women in politics – regarding clothes, body types, and of course hairstyles,” and her determination not to allow it to derail her.

She reads into the record her “friendship” with female politicians throughout the world, including Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma); Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan); Patricia Espinosa (Mexico); Dilma Rousseff (Brazil); Michelle Bachelet (Chile); and Wangari Maathai (Kenya).

She gives voice to her admiration for extraordinary “ordinary” women, like the “Damas de Blanco” (Ladies in White) in Cuba, who endured harassment, beatings and arrests but kept protesting the detention of political prisoners after Catholic mass every Sunday.

It is significant, it seems to me, that Mrs. Clinton goes out of her way to undercut the double standard, while sounding like a woman talking to other women.

At Chelsea’s wedding, she writes, “I couldn’t believe that the baby girl I had held in my arms...had grown into this beautiful and poised woman.” When she walked barefoot through a pagoda in Rangoon, she reports, an American journalist described her toenail polish as “sexy siren red.”

On her first extended trip overseas without Bill, she recalls, she had a “different haircut and a different role.” She recounts rolling her eyes, along with Cathy Ashton, the top foreign policy official for the European Union, when a male colleague “slipped into a sexist remark.”
And she characterizes the question she was asked by a television talk show host in Turkey — “When was the last time you fell in love and felt like a simple person with a simple life” — as not “normal fodder for a Secretary of State,” but “just the kind of topic that might help me connect to viewers.”

Near the end of “Hard Choices,” Mrs. Clinton quotes her mother to underscore the impact of “soft power.” Overcoming a childhood marked by trauma and abandonment, Dorothy Rodham enjoyed life as a homemaker, with a passion for service, social justice and philanthropy. She survived and flourished, she told Hillary, “because at critical points in my life somebody showed me kindness.”

Throughout “Hard Choices,” Mrs. Clinton claims that, although women’s issues “cut to the heart of our national security,” they have often been relegated to the margins of public policy. The world, she reminds us, is “full of women finding new ways to solve old problems,” eager to “go to school, own land, start a business and run for office.” Present company almost certainly included.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.